

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 05 COLOMBO 000592

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR INR/MR, I/RW, I/REC; PA  
SA/INS (CAMP, DEAN, WALLER) SA/PD (SCENSNY, ROGERS,  
STRYKER); SSA/PAS

E.O. 12958:N/A

TAGS: [KPAO](#) [PHUM](#) [OPRC](#) [KMDR](#) [OIIP](#) [PREL](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: MEDIA PLAY: Sri Lankan Media Consumed by  
Parliamentary Elections

1. (U) Summary. Sri Lanka's English and vernacular media offered exhaustive coverage and commentary about the nation's April 2 parliamentary elections. The morning after the poll (4/3), glowing lead headlines focused on the relatively peaceful election. The media also reported on election violations and violence. When the dust settled, Sri Lanka's media reported on the still unofficial outcome of the poll, as well as a brief U.S. Embassy statement released 4/3 under the headline, "U.S. Embassy Congratulates Sri Lanka on Elections." Three days after the election, the headlines continued to be occupied with speculation about the formation of a new government. Editorial comment about the election was heavy. The issues of the election - the economy and the peace process - continued to occupy commentators. One Sinhala commentator wrote, "The north - east crisis is our most crucial problem... The other issue - the economy... The need of a national plan is becoming more and more evident," while an English language editor noted, "The global support and the USD 4.5 billion available to underwrite a fair and just settlement must not be lost as the southern mainstream parties jockey for selfish advantage." Editors were also concerned with the formation of a new government, especially given that no party has a majority in parliament. One Tamil daily asked, "Will the minority parties support the UPFA to form the new government?" End Summary.

2. (U) The morning after the poll (4/3), glowing lead headlines focused on the relatively peaceful election. Independent English DAILY MIRROR reported (4/3), "Peaceful poll, huge turnout," while independent Tamil daily THINAKKURAL elucidated (4/3), "Most calm election in recent election history - more than 80% vote." Independent Sinhala daily LAKBIMA soothed (4/3), "Election is peaceful despite a few isolated incidents." Pro-LTTE Tamil daily SUDAR OLI offered (4/3), "Many voted early at this election - minor incidents in certain places - people in LTTE areas very pleased."

3. (U) The media also reported on election violations and violence. Independent Sinhala daily DIVAINA reported (4/3), "Violence in Hanguranketha, Ragala and Senarathpura; voters threatened and ballots snatched." Predictably partisan government-owned (and Kumaratunga-controlled) Sinhala daily DINAMINA cried (4/3), "Election terror in Hanguranketha," reporting about a UNP stronghold with a history of election-related violence. Government-owned English sister DAILY NEWS chimed in (4/3), "Polls peaceful thanks to President's action - PAFFREL Chief - Black sheep Nuwara Eliya, Puttalam and Kurunegala." Independent English daily ISLAND's headline was more even-handed (4/3), "Several govt., alliance politicians accused of polls violence."

4. (U) Independent Sinhala daily LANKADEEPA looked to the North for headlines about election fraud (4/3), "5000 Tigers came in buses for vote rigging, alleges Anandasangaree," quoting anti-LTTE Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) leader V. Anandasangaree. Surprisingly, pro-LTTE Tamil daily SUDAR OLI also reported an allegations of violations in the North, "Lots of election malpractice in Jaffna and Wanni - Douglas and Anandasangaree accuse," referring to Eelam People's Democratic Party leader Douglas Devananda and TULF leader Anandasangaree's complaints. Tamil media headlines giving voice to EPDP concerns are rare and are usually only found in government-owned Tamil daily THINAKARAN, which obligingly reported (4/3), "EPDP wants election in Jaffna annulled."

5. (U) When the dust settled, Sri Lanka's media reported on the still unofficial outcome of the poll. Predictably, government-owned media chronicled a victory for President Kumaratunga's party, the United People Freedom Alliance (UPFA). Government-owned English weekly SUNDAY OBSERVER gushed (4/4), "Freedom Alliance Triumphs," while sister government-owned Sinhala weekly SILUMINA wrote (4/4), "Government to be formed by Alliance after its brilliant victory." Government-owned Tamil weekly THINAKARAN VAARA MANJARI added (4/4), "Great victory for UPFA."

16. (U) The independent press was a bit more circumspect. Independent English weekly SUNDAY LEADER reported (4/4), "Verdict: A hung parliament," while independent English weekly SUNDAY ISLAND noted (4/4), "Close finish despite electorate landslide for Alliance." Independent Sinhala weekly DIVAMINA observed (4/4), "Discussions all day long on forming a new government; Mahinda called urgently - Alliance ahead." Of course, independent media outlets have their own agendas, too, as exhibited by independent Tamil weekly (and Tamil National Alliance (TNA) supporter) THINAKKURAL's headlines (4/4), "No political camp able to form a government on its own," and "Ranil [Wickremesinghe] hopes for indirect TNA support to form the government." Finally, independent English weekly SUNDAY TIMES offered some certainty (4/4), "UPFA set to form a minority govt.-- UNF-CWC-TNA-SLMC coalition talks for control of hung Parliament."

17. (U) Although the independent English DAILY MIRROR reported (4/3), "Major parties happy with polls," smaller political parties fretted about their role in the formation of a new government. The Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), whose slate of Buddhist monks yielded around nine seats, were a popular topic with the English and Sinhala media. Independent English weekly SUNDAY TIMES observed (4/4), "JHU monks prepare for historic role." Independent English weekly SUNDAY ISLAND noted (4/4), "JHU 'willing to cooperate,'" but independent Sinhala weekly SUNDAY LAKBIMA's headline contradicted (4/4), "Will not support any party; will be independent in the Parliament - JHU spokesperson." Meanwhile, independent Sinhala weekly SUNDAY LANKADEEPA added (4/4), "JHU against getting TNA support to form government." Voicing the concerns of the TNA, independent English weekly SUNDAY ISLAND's headline reported (4/4), "TNA seeks 'legitimate rights,'" while independent English weekly SUNDAY LEADER warned (4/4), "TNA will not help UPFA form a government."

18. (U) Sri Lankan media paid considerable attention to a brief U.S. Embassy statement released 4/3 under the headline, "U.S. Embassy Congratulates Sri Lanka on Elections," and continued with the text of the Embassy release, "The U.S. Embassy congratulates the Sri Lankan people on the conclusion of a largely peaceful parliamentary election with an impressive level of voter turnout. We applaud the performance of the Election Commission and the police. We look forward working with the new government elected by the people of Sri Lanka. We hope that the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam will return to the negotiating table as quickly as possible to forge a lasting peace." Government-owned English weekly SUNDAY OBSERVER crowed (4/4), "US Embassy Congratulates," while government-owned Sinhala weekly SILUMINA observed (4/4), "Ready to work with a new government - says America." Independent Sinhala weekly DIVAMINA added its own spin (4/4), "It was a peaceful, free election - American Embassy says." Tamil newspapers reported directly on their concerns. Independent Tamil weekly THINAKKURAL reported (4/4), "America wants the new government to commence talks with the LTTE," while independent Tamil weekender VIRAKESARI echoed (4/4), "The new government would talk to the LTTE - America is hopeful - US Embassy."

19. (U) Three days after the election, the headlines continued to be occupied with speculation about the formation of a new government. Independent English DAILY MIRROR asked (3/5), "Kadirgamar new PM? - President likely to create post of Deputy Premier," and reported on the JVP, "40 seats for JVP - dominating role in UPFA victory." Government-owned English DAILY NEWS reiterated (4/5), "Freedom Alliance clear winner," and offered, "JVP will take the country on correct path." Independent English daily ISLAND's headline described the situation (4/5), "UPFA to form govt. - Kadir [Lakshman Kadirgamar] tapped to be next premier - [Jathika] Hela Urumaya neutral." Independent Sinhala daily LAKBIMA noted (4/5), "UNP prepared to sit at the opposition, obeying democracy." Independent Tamil daily THINAKKURAL voiced the LTTE perspective (4/5), "A joint voice of the Tamils for Tamil sovereignty - LTTE statement regarding the victory of TNA."

10. (U) Editorial comment about the election was heavy. The issues of the election - the economy and the peace process - continued to occupy commentators. One Sinhala commentator wrote, "The north - east crisis is our most crucial problem... The other issue - the economy... The need of a national plan is becoming more and more evident," while an English language editor noted, "The global support and the USD 4.5 billion available to underwrite a fair and just settlement must not be lost as the southern mainstream parties jockey for selfish advantage." Editors were also concerned with the formation of a new government, especially given that no party has a majority in parliament. One Tamil daily asked, "Will the minority

parties support the UPFA to form the new government?"

----- Under the headline, "Peoples' verdict and the promises," independent Tamil daily VIRAKESARI commented (4/3) , "Both parties have promised to continue the peace process, to uplift the economy and to solve the unemployment problem.. It is the duty of those elected to fulfill these promises.."

Editorial excerpts.

The responsibility of electing the government is left in the hands of 12,899,032 voters of this country.. There are 5,698 candidates vying for the 225 seats in the parliament. All of them cannot get elected.. All those contesting cannot win, and the losers should be able to take it up.. Political parties, candidates and the supporters should bear this in mind.. The president and the prime minister have requested the people to respect law and order and make way for a free and fair election.. Both parties have promised to continue the peace process, to uplift the economy and to solve the unemployment problem.. It is the duty of those elected to fulfill these promises..

End editorial excerpts.

----- Under the headline, "Winners, losers and opportunities," independent English weekly SUNDAY ISLAND opined about saving the peace process and the economy (4/4), "The global support and the USD 4.5 billion available to underwrite a fair and just settlement must not be lost as the southern mainstream parties jockey for selfish advantage."

Editorial excerpts.

The best thing Kumaratunga can do for this country is to work towards a national government that she sought not so long ago from a position of weakness. This she can do from her present position of strength and Wickremesinghe and his party must cooperate if such an opportunity presents itself. That is the best way to negotiate a settlement of the ethnic question with the LTTE on terms that are fair to both sides. The global support and the USD 4.5 billion available to underwrite a fair and just settlement must not be lost as the southern mainstream parties jockey for selfish advantage.

End editorial excerpts.

----- Under the headline, "Freedom," government-owned English weekly SUNDAY OBSERVER commented (4/4), "The people have rejected the UNF Government lock, stock and barrel and ushered in a vibrant new era placing their trust in one who has promised them permanent peace and happiness."

Editorial excerpts.

At the time of writing the United People's Freedom Alliance appears to be romping home to victory and set to form the new Government. After burning his fingers in a brief, but costly interlude with the United Front Government led by Ranil Wickremesinghe, the voter has once more reposed trust in the country's charismatic President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, a warm, caring human being, a stateswoman of dynamism and courage. Cometh the hour, cometh the person.. The UNF tried by hook or by crook to prevent the Freedom Alliance from being formed and when that failed, tried to destroy it, by spreading vile canards, character assassination and all else that is evil. The people have rejected the UNF Government lock, stock and barrel and ushered in a vibrant new era placing their trust in one who has promised them permanent peace and happiness.

End editorial excerpts.

----- Under the headline, "Out of a hung Parliament, " independent English weekly SUNDAY TIMES commented (4/4), "The need is for the major parties to get together. For what we have inherited from this election is a hung Parliament and the Premier trying suicidally to form a Government with the minorities and the President to form a minority Government."

Editorial excerpts.

The masses have spoken, but not in one voice.. The end result -- a split nation, a hung Parliament and a minority government. . the backstage negotiations had already begun from the early hours of last morning even as the results were still pouring in. Promises of support and inducements of a varied nature were on offer to all and sundry, especially in the smaller parties, just to string together a majority in Parliament and a Government that will be wobbly as ever.. Out of this pot-pourri emerges a familiar

call, ignored by the political leaders of our times. The need is for the major parties to get together. For what we have inherited from this election is a hung Parliament and the Premier trying suicidally to form a Government with the minorities and the President to form a minority Government.

End editorial excerpts.

----- Under the headline, "Right vision for national issues and crises, " independent Sinhala weekly SUNDAY LANKADEEPA - commented (4/4), "The north - east crisis is our most crucial problem... The other issue - the economy... The need of a national plan is becoming more and more evident."

Editorial excerpts.

The north - east crisis is our most crucial problem. The solution to that should be a lasting one. The way to that solution is definitely the peace talks. Though it can't be done with a single stroke of a pen, we hope those required have a right approach to it. The other issue - the economy. We are not self sufficient in rice or fish. Our unemployment problem is also really grave. Annually it gets worse. The need of a national plan is becoming more and more evident.

End editorial excerpts.

----- Under the headline, "The only way out - 2, "independent English daily ISLAND commented (4/5), "The results of this election do indicate that a new set of political forces has come into play.... As we pointed out... co-operation between the SLFP and the UNP is the only way out of this political quagmire."

Editorial excerpts.

The results of this election do indicate that a new set of political forces has come into play.... For the first time ... TNA will be the sounding board of the LTTE on the most significant political issue, war or peace. Thus, parliament will become the threshing floor of this issue unlike earlier when the debating grounds even went overseas.... The JVP in this parliament becomes a key player with about 40 MPs.... Their MPs have scored huge preference votes and the party is bound to stake claims for plum portfolios in the cabinet.... The third significant development is the emergence of the Buddhist monks as a political party in parliament. In this hung parliament they could become a decisive Third Force, which was one of their prime objectives.... As we pointed out in our editorial on Saturday, co-operation between the SLFP and the UNP is the only way out of this political quagmire.

End editorial excerpts.

----- Under the headline, "Will the minority parties support the UPFA to form the government?" independent Tamil daily VIRAKESARI asked (4/5), "Will the minority parties support the UPFA to form the new government?"

Editorial excerpts.

The election is over. According to the elections commissioner, more than 75 percent of the voters have cast their votes. Neither the UPFA nor the UNF gained an absolute majority in the parliament.. As the UPFA has won more seats than any other party, the President has called the UPFA to form the next government.. There was speculation that the UPFA would seek the support of the Jathika Hela Urumaya, which has won nine seats, to form the next government, but Venerable Uduwe Dhammaloka Thero has clearly stated that JHU will stand neutral in the parliament.. So the UPFA is left with choice of CWC, SLMC or TNA.. Although the CWC contested the election under the UNP symbol, the pre-election agreement between the UNP and the CWC empowered CWC leader Arumugam Thondaman to use his discretion.. The CWC, SLMC and the TNA during their election propaganda stated that their respective parties are going to be the kingmakers. Will the minority parties support the UPFA to form the new government?

End editorial excerpts.

LUNSTEAD